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ABSTRACT

Although gifted children have been the subject of investigation for 60 years, little information is available on gifted adults, particularly in regard to life satisfaction. To investigate life satisfaction in adults who as children were labeled as gifted, 298 adults, with a mean age of 27, completed a Likert-type instrument measuring degree of life satisfaction, and Flanagan's Quality of Life Scale. Degree of life satisfaction assessed such areas as happiest period of life, general life satisfaction, and feelings about personal and societal futures. The quality of life factors focused on physical and material well being, interpersonal relations, social activities, personal development and fulfillment, and recreation. For purposes of analysis the subjects were divided into five age groups at 5 year intervals. An analysis of the results showed that gifted individuals have a high degree of confidence in themselves and are satisfied with the quality of their lives. The largest percentage in all age groups rated their present age as the happiest period of their lives, and the majority (70%) of all respondents were satisfied with life in general. In regard to the future of society, 34% were optimistic, while 81% were optimistic about their personal futures and that of their families. Of most importance to this population of gifted individuals were health and personal safety, learning, understanding oneself, and relationship with one's spouse. Of least importance was participation in government and public affairs. (Author/BL)

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Life Satisfaction in a Gifted Population

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Abstract

A follow-up study of 298 adults who had been labelled as gifted students was undertaken to determine their degree of life satisfaction on several measures. Students enrolled in Western Carolina University's summer gifted program between 1958 and 1972 were asked to respond to questions relating to degree of life satisfaction (e.g., happiest period of life, satisfaction with life in general, feelings about personal future, feelings about the future of society), and a scale measuring quality of life. The present study indicated that gifted individuals have a high degree of confidence in themselves and are satisfied with the quality of their lives. The largest percentage in all age groups rated their present age as the happiest period of their lives. Seventy per cent of all respondents were satisfied with life in general. Thirty-four per cent were optimistic or very optimistic about the future of society; eighty-one per cent were optimistic or very optimistic about their personal future and that of their families. Of most importance to this population of gifted individuals were health and personal safety, learning, understanding oneself, and relationship with one's spouse. Of least importance was participation in government and public affairs.

Life Satisfaction in a Gifted Population

Those activities and qualities which produce life satisfaction have been explored by measuring numerous variables including amount of education, standard of living (Campbell, Converse, & Rogers, 1976), health, personal relationships, recreation, politics (Flanagan, 1978), marriage, and raising children (Soper, 1980). These variables have been examined in studies of different races (Clements & Sauer, 1976), across different ages (Medley, 1980; Runyan, 1979; Stewart, 1976), and with males and females (Medley, 1980; Runyan, 1979).

Gifted individuals first became the subjects of investigation with the work of Lewis Terman over 60 years ago (Terman & Oden, 1947). In addition to the impressive amounts of data provided about gifted children, another of Terman's contributions was his longitudinal study of gifted subjects into adulthood (Sears, 1977; Terman & Oden, 1959). These studies provided valuable insight into experiences and conditions of life unique to the gifted. Since Terman, relatively few studies have collected longitudinal information from adults who had been in gifted programs as children. These studies (Bachtold, 1978; Humes & Campbell, 1980) have gathered data concerning occupations, interests, talents, attitudes about school, effectiveness of gifted programs, and suggestions concerning gifted education.

Although variables related to life satisfaction in gifted children have been examined, little information is available concerning the life satisfaction of gifted adults. The purpose of the present study was to assess several measures of life satisfaction in adults who, as children, had been labelled as gifted.

Method

Subjects

An attempt was made to locate 1370 adults who participated in Western Carolina University's summer gifted program between 1958 and 1972. Current addresses were obtained for 712 participants and 298 adults returned all information and questionnaires and therefore were subjects in the study. The program was designed for grades four through twelve and the adults surveyed ranged in age from 17 to 40 with a mean of 27.

The students chosen for the summer program came from all areas of the Southeast. All students who attended the program had to be nominated by a teacher or school administrator. Grades of participants had to be superior, class rank had to be in the top five, achievement test scores had to be above grade level, and IQ scores had to be in the very superior range according to a standardized individual intelligence test (usually the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children or Stanford-Binet).

Instruments

Subjects were asked to respond to questions relating to degree of life satisfaction (e.g. happiest period of life, satisfaction with life in general, feelings about personal future, and feelings about the future of society. Questions were arranged on a Likert format (very optimistic to very pessimistic or very important to not at all important). Subjects were also asked to fill out a life satisfaction scale (Flanagan, 1978) which includes 15 quality of life components or factors believed to contribute to life satisfaction. The value of each component in producing life satisfaction is rated along a continuum from very important to not at all important.

Procedure

Respondents were separated into five age groups, 16-20; 21-25; 26-30; 31-35; 36-40. (There were only three subjects in the 36-40 age group and they were not included in the analysis when different age groups were compared.) Percentages of responses and ratings to questions were tabulated and compared.

Results

For all age groups, the largest percentage of respondents rated their present age as the happiest period of their lives (see Table 1). The second largest percentage in each age group rated the previous five years as the happiest, and this same progression continued for all age groups until the age period from 11-15. In all age groups at least twice as many respondents rated the period from 6-10 as happiest in their lives as rated the period from 11-15 as the happiest.

Insert Table 1 about here

Only 12 per cent of the respondents reported dissatisfaction with their lives currently. Twenty-seven per cent indicated that they were very satisfied with their lives in general (see Table 2). Although only five per cent of the subjects in this study were very optimistic about the future of society, 38 per-cent were very optimistic about their personal futures and that of their families (see Table 3). In addition, 31 per cent indicated that they were pessimistic about the future of society but only four per cent reported pessimism about their personal futures and that of their families. There were no significant differences between males and females concerning satisfaction

with life in general or feelings about personal future and the future of society. However, of the eleven respondents who were pessimistic about their futures, nine were males.

Insert Table 2 and Table 3 about here

Responses to Flanagan's Quality of Life Scale indicated that health and personal safety, learning, understanding oneself, and relationship with one's spouse were of most importance (80 per cent or more of respondents rated them important or very important) to the life satisfaction of this group of gifted individuals (see Table 4). Of least importance (only 19 per cent rated as important or very important) was participation in activities relating to local and national government and public affairs. Females rated material comforts and relations with other people as more important to their life satisfaction than did males. Males rated participation in active recreation as more important to their life satisfaction than did females.

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

The longitudinal studies of gifted individuals by Lewis Terman and his colleagues several decades ago suggested that those who excelled intellectually were frequently above average in other aspects of life including health, physical development, social adjustment and emotional well-being (Terman & Oden, 1947; 1959). The results of the present study are consistent with Terman's finding of generalized well-being among the gifted and indicate that gifted

individuals have a high degree of confidence in themselves and are satisfied with the quality of their lives.

The present results also indicate that the largest percentage of respondents in every age group were happiest at their present age. Interestingly, in all age groups, the age period chosen as happiest by the fewest number of respondents was 11-15. This finding is consistent with another study (Stewart, 1976) which reported adolescence as the least satisfying stage in the life cycle of gifted individuals. Perhaps it is the emerging recognition of difference and also the pressures and expectations which ensue, resulting in a sometimes troubled existence for these students.

In addition to a high degree of satisfaction with their lives, the subjects of the current study possess a considerable amount of confidence in themselves and optimism about their ability to be successful in the future. Although their feelings about the future of society present a bell-shaped curve from very optimistic to very pessimistic, their feelings about their own futures are skewed positively with 81 per cent optimistic and very optimistic.

Responses to Flanagan's Quality of Life Scale of what factors are most important in creating life satisfaction posed several interesting questions. Previous research (Flanagan, 1978; Soper, 1980) has indicated that having and raising children were significant contributors to life satisfaction. In the present study, only 48 per cent of the gifted respondents rated having and raising children as important or very important.(It should be point out, however, that the mean age of respondents was 27 and just under ten per cent were teenagers, suggesting that child-bearing years were still ahead for much of this population.)

Dissatisfaction and/or disenchantment with politics and the governmental process was registered by this population as local and national governmental activities were important or very important to less than 20 per cent of the respondents.

One rather puzzling result was the large discrepancy between the importance males and females attached to material comforts in their life satisfaction. Material comforts were rated as important or very important to life satisfaction by 98 per cent of the females in the study; 30 per cent of the males rated meterial comforts as important or very important. Further investigation is necessary before any conclusions can be drawn from these figures, however.

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Table 1

Happiest Period of Life

Age Group:	31-35	n = 36 (13%)		m = 22 (61%)		f = 14 (38%)	
36-40	31-35	26-30	21-25	16-20	11-15	6-10	0-5
N/A	15	6	6	4	1	3	1
	(41%)	(17%)	(17%)	(11%)	(3%)	(8%)	(3%)
Age Group:	26-30	n = 113 (41%)		m = 53 (47%)		f = 60 (53%)	
36-40	31-35	26-30	21-25	16-20	11-15	6-10	0-5
N/A	N/A	55	31	14	2	8	3
		(49%)	(27%)	(12%)	(2%)	(7%)	(3%)
Age Group:	21-25	n = 98 (35%)		m = 53 (54%)		f = 45 (46%)	
36-40	31-35	26-30	21-25	16-20	11-15	6-10	0-5
N/A	N/A	N/A	55	29	3	6	5
			(56%)	(30%)	(3%)	(6%)	(5%)
Age Group:	16-20	n = 28 (10%)		m = 15 (54%)		f = 13 (46%)	
36-40	31-35	26-30	21-25	16-20	11-15	6-10	0-5
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	26	0	2	0
				(93%)		(7%)	

Table 2

Satisfaction with Life in General

Item	Total % (n)	Males % (n)	Females % (n)
Very Satisfied	27 (79)	52 (41)	48 (38)
Satisfied	43 (127)	50 (63)	50 (64)
Moderately Satisfied	19 (57)	58 (33)	42 (24)
Moderately Dissatisfied	11 (33)	58 (19)	42 (14)
Very Dissatisfied	1 (2)	100 (2)	- (0)

Total n = 298

Table 3

Feelings About Future

Item	Total	Males	Female
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
Feelings About Future of Society			
Very Optimistic	5 (15)	60 (9)	40 (6)
Optimistic	29 (86)	58 (50)	42 (36)
Moderately Optimistic	35 (103)	55 (57)	45 (46)
Moderately Pessimistic	26 (78)	45 (35)	55 (43)
Very Pessimistic	5 (16)	50 (8)	50 (8)
Total n = 298			
Feelings About Personal Future and Family			
Very Optimistic	38 (112)	55 (62)	45 (50)
Optimistic	43 (126)	54 (68)	46 (58)
Moderately Optimistic	16 (47)	38 (18)	62 (29)
Moderately Pessimistic	3 (10)	80 (8)	20 (2)
Very Pessimistic	1 (1)	100 (1)	- (0)
Total n = 296			

Table 4

Percentage of Respondents Reporting Each of 15 Components as Important or Very Important to Their Quality of Life

	Total	Male	Female
Physical and Material Well-Being			
A. Material Comforts	65%	36%	98%
B. Health and Personal Safety	87%	87%	86%
Relations With Other People			
C. Relationships With Your Parents, Brothers, Sisters, and Other Relatives	72%	65%	79%
D. Having and Raising Children	48%	43%	53%
E. Close Relationship With Husband/Wife	82%	77%	88%
F. Close Friends	79%	77%	81%
Social, Community, and Civic Activities			
G. Helping and Encouraging Others	66%	61%	71%
H. Participation in Activities Relating to Local and National Governmant and Public Affairs	19%	19%	18%
Personal Development and Fulfillment			
I. Learning	87%	87%	87%
J. Understanding Yourself	83%	79%	87%
K. Work	74%	74%	74%
L. Expressing Yourself	59%	54%	65%

Table 4 (cont.)

Percentages of Respondents Reporting Each of 15 Components as Important or Very Important to Their Quality of Life

	Total	Male	Female
Recreation			
M. Socializing	45%	47%	44%
N. Reading, Listening to Music, or Observing	41%	41%	41%
O. Participation in Active Recreation	58%	69%	45%